

To whom it may concern,

I am the program manager for the adult outpatient services at United Services in Mansfield, CT. I am writing to you to share my concern of the lack of mental health budget available to our mental health agency, as well as other treatment agencies in Connecticut. Prior to COVID, the community was already in crisis due to increased mental health symptoms, the opioid crisis and other risk factors. Working in the mental health field, at USI, as well as at a psychiatric and detox inpatient hospital, I have seen the need for mental health treatment on a daily basis. There has never been a decrease in need, admissions consistently coming in, without question. Over the past two years, since COVID, it has been apparent how much more mental health has affected the community, stretching across populations that have never struggled with their mental health before. We are seeing more and more clients at both of my jobs who report that they have not had treatment before, due to COVID. For those clients that have had treatment history, they have reported how COVID has affected their mental health symptoms for the worse.

Another concern that I wanted to address is related to the budget as well, in terms of not having the funding available to provide a livable wage for our employees. USI has had a high turnover rate, with the number one complaint being that the pay is not high enough. Coworkers have reportedly had difficulty being able to make ends meet with not being paid much above minimum wage. Due to being short-staffed, I have attempted to reach out to individuals I know in the field about job openings. When I present the job details to these individuals, I have always been met with a response that USI does not pay enough for what the job details. This has been my experience, as well as other coworkers' experiences when trying to recruit, per report.

I want to thank you for the 4% cost of living adjustment for community non-profits that was included in last year's budget. I have hopes that a long-term plan is put into place to address underfunding of community non-profits and fund services by \$461 million over five years, or an additional 8% in fiscal year 2023. As an agency, we are currently operating at about 25% vacancy rate, as is most, if not all, of the other non-profit services providers. The primary reasoning that an interviewee turns down employment at United Services, or leaves our agency, is due to the low wages in place. Unfortunately these vacancies are leading to a higher caseload for all clinicians, leading to a stressful job on a daily basis. The majority of clients are also not able to be seen at the frequency that they need medical necessity for.

Due to my concerns addressed above, the governor's proposed budget for the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services is unable to provide support for existing services and future clients. I am concerned for the future of mental health treatment in Connecticut, if a budget is not increased. Thank you for your time and I truly hope that my concerns are viewed seriously.

Sincerely,

Chelsea Bellefleur, LPC